

Message Text

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ACTION SS-25

INFO OCT-01 ADP-00 /026 W

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R 100955 Z MAY 73

FM AMEMBASSY PHNOM PENH

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 1215

INFO AMEMBASSY BANGKOK

AMEMBASSY PARIS

AMEMBASSY SAIGON

AMEMBASSY VIENTIANE

CINCPAC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 PHNOM PENH 4476

EXDIS

E. O. 1165 C GDS

TAGS: PINT

& 0*94, CB

SUBJECT: RETURN OF CAMBODIAN SENIOR STATESMAN SON SAAN TO
PHNOM PENH

REF: PARIS 12734

1. SON SANN, FORMER LONG- TIME GOVERNOR OF THE NATIONAL BANK (1955-1958), FORMER PRIME MINISTER, AND A FORMER CLOSE BUT CRITICAL ASSOCIATE OF SIHANOUK, RETURNED TO PHNOM PENH MAY 7 FOR A SOJOURN OF SEVERAL WEEKS. THIS WAS ONLY HIS SECOND VISIT TO THE GKR (THE FIRST OCCURRED IN JULY 1971) SINCE HE TOOK UP RESIDENCE IN PARIS IN THE SPRING OF 1970 FOLLOWING THE DEPOSITION OF SIHANOUK. REGARDED AS A POTENTIAL BRIDGE BETWEEN THE GKR AND GRUNK SINCE HE BELONGS TO NEITHER; WIDELY KNOWN AND RESPECTED AS AN HONEST AND ASTUTE KHMER NATIONALIST AND STATESMAN; A PRACTICING BUDDHIST WITH PROGRESSIVE NON- COMMUNIST CREDENTIALS; SON SANN IS POTENTIAL FIGURE OF SOME IMPORTANCE IN THE MANEUVERINGS WHICH MAY BE NECESSARY IF NEGOTIATIONS ARE EVER TO GET UNDER WAY AMONG THE DISPARATE ELEMENTS WHICH MAKE UP THE GKR AND THE GRUNK/ FUNK. HIS RETURN WAS STIMULATED BY CHENG HENG,
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WAS ASSISTED BY CERTAIN FRENCH BUSINESS AND GOVERNMENT INTERESTS, AND WAS APPROVED IN ADVANCE BY MARSHAL LON NOL.

2. I SPENT OVER TWO HOURS WITH SON SANN MAY 9. HE DID MOST OF THE TALKING, REVIEWING IN PRECISE DETAIL HIS RECORD OF PUBLIC SERVICE DATING FROM 1946 AND THE UPS AND DOWNS OF HIS LONG ASSOCIATION WITH SIHANOUK. HE HAS AN EXCELLENT MEMORY, A REFINED AND ACTIVE MIND, AND CONSIDERABLE POLITICAL ACUMEN. OVER ALL, HE IMPRESSED ME FAVORABLY, AND HE IS CERTAINLY ONE OF THE MOST DECENT AND INTELLIGENT KHMER NATIONALISTS OF THE GENERATION NOW IN ITS MID- FIFTIES TO EARLY SIXTIES. THE QUESTION IS WHETHER HE IS NOT ALSO DEPASSE IN THE PRESENT SITUATION, ALTHOUGH IT IS VERY EVIDENT SHE HIMSELF BELIEVES HE CAN STILL INFLUENCE DEVELOPMENTS.

3. THE HIGHLIGHTS OF THE MEETING CAN BE SUMMARIZED AS FOLLOWS.

A. SON SANN BELIEVES PASSIONATELY THAT THE KHMER NATION MUST SAVE ITSELF FROM WHAT HE DESCRIBED AS A CIVIL WAR OF DEEPENING DIMENSIONS WHICH CAN POTENTIALLY DESTROY THE KHMER PEOPLE AND/ OR RENDER THEM THE PAWNS OF AN IMPORTED COMMUNISM. HE IS CRITICAL EQUALLY OF LON NOL FOR HIS QTE SHORT- SIGHTED UNQTE ANTI- COMMUNISM AND OF SIHANOUK FOR HIS EQUIVOCATIONS BEFORE THE COMMUNIST THREAT. SANN' S STATED OBJECTIVE IS A NEUTRAL NON- ALIGNED INDEPENDENT CAMBODIA WITHIN EXISTING FRONTIERS, FOLLOWING A MORE QTE PROGRESSIVE UNQTE POLICY AND DEVELOPING ITS ECONOMY ALONG MIXED CAPITALIST- STATIST LINES.

B. HE REGARDS THE IMMEDIATE REQUIREMENT TO BE A REJUVENATION OF POPULAR SUPPORT FOR KHMER NATIONALISM AND FOR AN IMMEDIATE CEASE- FIRE. HE FEARS THAT THE LONGER THE COMMUNIST- DOMINATED INSURGENCY IS IN PLACE IN THE COUNTRYSIDE THE MORE DIFFICULT IT WILL BE TO UNDO ITS EFFECT ON THE POPULATION. THIS POINT, HE NOTED, IS LOST ON MARSHAL LON NOL, AND HE DESCRIBED THE LATTER, ON WHOM HE CALLED MAY 8, AS DIVORCED FROM ANY REAL PERCEPTION OF THE PRESENT THREAT AND AS INNOCENTLY CONFIDENT THAT OTHER POWERS WILL SAVE THE GKR FROM

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COLLAPSE AND COMMUNISM. SON SANN OBSERVED FURTHER THAT THE DEPARTURE OF BGEN LON NON FROM THE SCENE WAS A HIGHLY POSITIVE DEVELOPMENT AND THAT WAYS SHOULD BE FOUND TO PROLONG HIS ABSENCE. SANN ALSO NOTED THAT THE DEPARTURE OF LON NOL HIMSELF FROM POLITICAL LIFE WILL EVENTUALLY BE NECESSARY IF NEGOTIATIONS ARE TO GET UNDER WAY. HE ASKED IF WE COULD ACCOMPLISH THIS, PERHAPS IN

THE GUISE OF MEDICAL ASSISTANCE. I REPLIED THAT THIS
EVENTUALITY COULD NOT BE MEANINGFULLY ADDRESSED AT THIS

STAGE, AND I RECALLED THAT LON NOL HAD TOLD ME SOME MONTHS
BACK HE WOULD VOLUNTARILY RETIRE FROM PUBLIC LIFE IF NO
LONGER NEEDED PROVIDED THE REPUBLIC WERE SAVED AND
SIHANOUK DID NOT RETURN. SANN REMARKED THAT THE MARSHAL
HAD MADE THE SAME COMMENT TO HIM; HE THEN ITERATED THE
VIEW THAT LON NOL COULD PROVE TO BE A SERIOUS OBSTACLE
TO RECONCILIATION AMONG THE KHMER.

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 PHNOM PENH 4476

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C. SON SANN REGARDS HIS PRESENT VISIT AS AN
OPPORTUNITY TO TAKE SOUNDINGS EVERYWHERE ALONG THE
SPECTRUM AND HE MENTIONED SPECIFICALLY CHENG HENG,
SIRIK MATAK, IN TAM, AND DEMOCRATIC PARTY CHAIRMAN
CHAU SAU. HE COMMENTED POSITIVELY ON THE ESTABLISHMENT
OF THE FOUR- MAN HIGH POLITICAL COUNCIL AND ON THE
CANDIDACY OF SOK CHHONG AS PRIME MINISTER. HE
EXPRESSED DOUBTS, HOWEVER, AS TO WHETHER A FULL- FLEDGED
GOVERNMENT WERE NECESSARY WITH THE COUNCIL IN PLACE,
WHICH COULD RULE ON ITS OWN ON THE MODEL OF THE THAI
JUNTA. I POINTED OUT THAT THERE WERE VERY SERIOUS
MILITARY AND ECONOMIC ISSUES NEEDING QUICK RESOLUTION
AND REQUIRING NOT ONLY HIGH LEVEL DECISION BUT EFFECTIVE
IMPLEMENTATION; THE LATTER COULD HARDLY BE SUPPLIED BY

THE COUNCIL.

D. SON SANN SAID THAT HE HOPES TO ASSESS WHILE HERE THE POSSIBILITY OF SETTING IN MOTION A SORT OF GRASS ROOTS' MOVEMENT FOR A CEASE FIRE AND PEACE WHICH COULD MOBILIZE THE ENERGIES OF THE POPULATION AND WHICH COULD PROVE SO ATTRACTIVE THAT THE INSURGENCY COULD NOT RESIST

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NEGOTIATIONS FOR A POLITICAL SETTLEMENT. I REMARKED THAT ONE COULD ONLY APPLAUD AN EFFORT TO STIMULATE SUCH A MOVEMENT BUT THAT IT WOULD ALSO HAVE TO BE ACCOMPANIED BY IMPROVED FANK RESISTANCE TO ENEMY ACTIONS AND SHOULD BE BASED ON WISE AND ENERGETICALLY APPLIED ECONOMIC POLICIES. SANN DID NOT DEMUR, BUT HE PERCEIVES THE PSYCHOLOGICAL OPERATION AS THE HEART OF THE MATTER. HE SEEMED REASONABLY CONFIDENT HE COULD PROVIDE THE SPARK TO IGNITE POPULAR SUPPORT..

4. ASKED SANN HOW LONG HE EXPECTED TO REMAIN IN PHNOM PENH AND HE REPLIED UNTIL THE END OF THE MONTH. HE SAID THAT HE REQUIRED FURTHER MEDICAL ATTENTION IN FRANCE (HE COUGHED REPEATEDLY DURING THE MEETING FROM WHAT HE DESCRIBED AS A CHRONIC BRONCHITIS) AND THAT HE COULD MAKE A PRETTY GOOD ASSESSMENT OF THE SITUATION OVER THE NEXT THREE WEEKS. I EXPLAINED THAT OUR OBJECTIVES IN CAMBODIA APPEAR TO BE CONGRUENT WITH HIS AND THAT WE STRONGLY FAVOR A CEASE FIRE AND A POLITICAL SETTLEMENT IN CAMBODIA AS PART OF OUR OVER- ALL EFFORT TO RESTORE PEACE AND STABILITY TO FORMER INDO- CHINA. BOTH OF US AGREED THAT HANOI IS THE MAJOR OBSTACLE TO REALIZING THESE OBJECTIVES. WE ALSO AGREED TO HAVE A FURTHER CONVERSATION LATER IN HIS STAY, PERHAPS LATE NEXT WEEK.

5. WITH REGARD TO SIHANOUK, SANN MENTIONED THAT IT HAD PERHAPS BEEN UNFORTUNATE, ALTHOUGH HE SAID HE FULLY COMPREHENDED THE REASONING BEHIND IT, THAT THE U. S. HAD REJECTED THE OFFER OF CONTACT WITH SIHANOUK OR HIS REPRESENTATIVE. SIHANOUK, HE REMARKED, HAD BEEN OFFENDED. YOU WILL NOTE THAT THIS COMMENT GENERALLY MATCHES THAT MADE BY BOLLE TO EMBASSY PARIS (PARA 3, REFTEL).

6. COMMENT. IT WOULD BE PREMATURE TO OFFER A JUDGMENT AS TO WHAT IF ANYTHING SON SANN CAN ACCOMPLISH IN THE COMPLEX LOCAL SITUATION, BUT HIS APPARENT READINESS TO ACT TO CREATE A CLIMATE CONDUCTIVE TO NEGOTIATIONS CAN ONLY BE WELCOMED. HIS MOST LIKELY POINT OF CONTACT IN ANY INTERMEDIARY ROLE, AS I TAKE IT, WOULD BE GRUNK

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PRIME MINISTER PENN NOUTH, A VERY INTIMATE AND LONG- TIME
ASSOCIATE; BUT HE ALSO IMPLIED THAT TIES TO THE
IN- COUNTRY INSURGENCY MIGHT ALSO BE EXPLOITED.
SWANK

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